

LECTURE SUMMARY

The Place of Children in Scottish Religious Revivals^{*}

‘Wherever a revival of religion has taken place, it has been generally observed that young people formed a considerable proportion of those brought under its influence’.¹ This remarkable statement is found in *The Particular Instructions to Catechists* issued by the Haldane’s Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home (SPGH) in 1798 – remarkable because it refers to ‘revival’ whereas most writing of the period more commonly uses the word ‘awakening’, as well as the earliest reference I have located to this under-researched phenomenon.²

On his first visit to Scotland George Whitefield preached to the orphans in Heriot’s Hospital in Edinburgh: the effect was remarkable. The ‘Second Doctor’ (Assistant Head) wrote to him a few months later to thank him that ‘Heriot’s Hospital is now no more a den of vicious boys, but a Bethel, for there God is worshipped’.³ He also reports having to break up prayer meetings in the dormitories at eleven o’clock at night for fear the boys should catch cold – boys who were sent off to bed at 8pm. While in

^{*} This paper was delivered to the Scottish Church History Society on 26 November 2014 and draws on his book *Children in Revival* (Fearn, 2002).

¹ Robert Haldane, *Address to the Public, concerning Political Opinions and Plans Lately Adopted to Promote Religion in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1800), p. 19.

² D. A. Ward’s *Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge, 1992) traces the beginnings of eighteenth-century revival to a children’s prayer meeting in Silesia in 1708.

³ *The Weekly: or, An account of the most Remarkable Particulars relating to the present Progress of the Gospel*, 17 October 1741.

Edinburgh Whitefield also claimed to have 'preached to the children of the city with a congregation of near 20,000 in the park'.⁴

Teenagers were clearly converted in the Cambuslang revival, for their testimonies have been collected in the McCulloch Manuscripts. In Kilsyth a prayer meeting for ten to sixteen-year-old girls preceded the revival, and by March 1743 Robe reports that some 70 young people aged eight to eighteen meet twice a week for prayer, singing and Bible reading, and he records a six and a seven year old giving a clear testimony to conviction of sin and conversion. Nearby in Kirkintilloch sixteen children met together to pray in a barn, and in Baldernock school the children met three times a day to pray: before school, lunchtime, and after school.

Children's prayer meetings are found throughout central Scotland, and Arthur Fawcett claimed 'there is abundant evidence of meetings of children, run by children themselves' even before the revival.⁵ In 1743 we know of a children's housegroup which met on a Monday evening in Rosskeen by Alness where twelve illiterate children aged nine to fifteen to pray, sing, and go over the teaching they had previously heard.

The SPGH set up Sunday Schools and their missionaries reported a hunger for Scripture teaching. Reports of the religious experience of the children are few, beyond stating 'the children are very attentive' while listening to the gospel, but prayer groups of both boys and girls were discovered in Dundee.⁶ Forty years later McCheyne returned from his tour of the Holy Land to Dundee and found that as a result of the revival under W.C. Burns that there were thirty-nine fellowship meetings in his church and 'five of them were

⁴ Amos Stevens Billingsley, *The Life of the Great Preacher, Reverend George Whitefield, 'prince of Pulpit Orators'* (London, 1878), p. 206.

⁵ Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang revival: the Scottish evangelical revival of the eighteenth century* (London, 1971), p. 67.

⁶ *An Account of the Proceedings of the Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home* (Edinburgh, 1799), p. 67.

conducted and attended entirely by little children'.⁷ Burns also saw a similar response among the young in Kilsyth and Perth.

The Gaelic Schools Society was a major instrument of revival within the Gaelic speaking areas. In the 1840s several of the islands and parts of the West coast witnessed revival scenes, and in Lochcarron some boys built themselves a hut to meet in for prayer. The 1860 report details an instance at Kershader on Lewis, where during a reading lesson seven children aged ten to twelve fell onto the floor under conviction of sin while reading John 19, and told the teacher they knew they were crucifying Christ with their lives. Other reports speak of children on Skye crying because they were too naked to go to church and holding their own meetings in consequence in 1861, and another says that children of ten and twelve regularly walked seven miles to church and prayer meetings every week, and some twelve miles each way from Arnisort to Portree to hear preaching. Mention also ought be made of Kitty Smith, a girl living on the island of Pabay in Loch Ruag, Lewis, who was known to have a ministry of prayer before she died at the age of eight in 1829; due to her remoteness she had never attended church.

The Baptist Home Missionary Society reports of 'mostly women and children' being affected in the Fairy Bridge revival of 1842 on Skye by 'falling down as if dead,' while at Grantown on Spey 100 people were publicly baptised in the river over a twenty-one month period.⁸ This included three fourteen year olds and one of twelve, and in 1866 the opening of the new Baptist chapel was celebrated with eleven baptisms, of which five were girls and five were boys under the age of seventeen. Again the younger teens reportedly met for prayer by themselves as well as attending all the other meetings.

⁷ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh, 1892), pp. 544-5.

⁸ Sprange, *Children in Revival*, p. 115.

The revival of 1859–62 has been well documented by Edwin Orr and others, and references abound to children meeting for prayer.⁹ In Greenock ‘vast numbers of meetings originated and [were] kept up by the children themselves’;¹⁰ in Bridgeton fifty boys met four times a week, while three large united prayer meetings for children were established to serve Central Glasgow. The Wynd Mission set up a Children’s Church, with sixty similar smaller meetings.

Across in Edinburgh by March 1860 ‘the prayer meeting for children in the city numbers several hundreds’, and in October Richard Weaver addressed 1500 children in the Assembly Hall, from which they were then banned because ‘your little feet are spoiling their fine carpets’.¹¹

In Aberdeen the revival commenced among the children at the end of 1858, and by early 1859 thirty-five eight to fourteen year olds were meeting in Marywell School for prayer. Before the end of that year one writer is aware of six different meetings for boys, some attended by up to sixty, all within five minutes walk of his home, as well as numerous meetings of girls. In July 1860 three thousand attended the juvenile service during the Huntly open air meetings, hosted by the Duchess of Gordon, and facilitated by the Great North of Scotland Railway Company running special trains at discounted fares to transport them there.

On several occasions schools ground to a halt as the Spirit of God swept through them making normal school work impossible. One example is Pilrig School in Edinburgh on Friday afternoon 18 November 1859, and the Head, William Robertson, sent for the minister. He was not available so the school was dismissed, and the whole school assembled on the Saturday afternoon to listen to him. By the Monday all the children in the top class had professed conversion and on the Tuesday the next class down.

⁹ Edwin Orr, *The Second Evangelical Awakening in Britain* (London, 1949), pp. 64–8.

¹⁰ *The Scottish Guardian*, 24 April 1860.

¹¹ *The Scottish Guardian*, 8 November, 1860.

A similar occurrence is reported from Pulteneytown (Wick) on Monday 6 February 1860, where one girl came under conviction of sin during the Bible lesson, and it spread through the school. Over a dozen boys prayed through their lunch break, and children met together spontaneously to pray until there were a dozen separate children's prayer meetings in the village, some attended by as many as fifty. The minister, Revd George Stevenson, stated 'this impulse to pray together was quite a spontaneous movement on the part of the children, and took their teachers and parents by surprise'.¹² According to D. A. Currie, the spontaneous occurrence of prayer meetings among children 'may have been a distinctively Scottish phenomenon'.¹³ Also in the north, nightly prayer meetings were held in the Free Church in Dunbeath where it was reported that 'boys from six to twelve years of age stand up to pray uninvited and can scarcely be got to desist'.¹⁴

Another feature of this revival was the way in which God actually used children in it. In Eyemouth a three year old girl led her mother into assurance of salvation by quoting the text she had heard the minister use the previous day. An eight-year-old boy in Findochty 'spoke in the meeting, and his words made such a deep impression that more were convicted and converted than on any other occasion'.¹⁵ In Hopeman, a 10 year old boy prayed publicly for an out pouring of the Holy Spirit and 'the greater part of the audience were manifestly much affected' and 'cries for mercy arose from almost every part of the schoolroom', while in Portessie a Free Church elder returned home from a meeting one night to find his fourteen year old daughter preaching to a house full of people.¹⁶

¹² Harry Sprange, *Children in Revival* (Fearn, 2002), p. 275.

¹³ D. A. Currie, 'The Growth of Evangelicalism in the Church of Scotland 1793-1843' (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, 1991), p. 358.

¹⁴ *The Wynd Journal*, 7 April 1860; Sprange, *Children in Revival*, p. 281.

¹⁵ *The Revival*, 5 March 1863; Sprange, *Children in Revival*, p. 245.

¹⁶ Elizabeth MacHardie, *James Turner, or, How to reach the masses* (Aberdeen, 1875), p. 147; Sprange, *Children in Revival*, p. 241.

Indeed one of the features of the revivals was the desire of young people to be used: in Glasgow the Wynd Church trained children over twelve as a visitation agency; in Portknockie a fifteen year old started a prayer meeting for those younger than himself and his own tract agency; and in Dundee, after Moody's 1874 visit, it was said that 'young people are crowding around their ministers and crying for work'.¹⁷

The Glasgow Foundry Boys Religious Society, which started in 1865 before school attendance became compulsory, specifically targeted older children and by 1882 their evangelist, Alexander Mackeith, was addressing crowds of 2,000 with responses of over 100 at many meetings. Again in late 1899 a significant response to the gospel was recorded in Glasgow with possibly as many as 10,000 children over the age of nine attending meetings, with up to 200 responding nightly, prompting this comment: 'it is not too much to say they are weeping their way by hundreds to the foot of the cross'.¹⁸

To conclude this quick survey of Scottish revivals, we must note that children's prayer meetings also sprung up following Moody's campaigns in Paisley in 1874, Greenock in 1882, and Mintlaw in 1883, and in response to the revivals in Charlotte Chapel (Edinburgh) in 1905 and in the Dingwall/Black Isle area in 1906. Children were converted in the revivals along the Moray Coast in the 1920s, and during the 1939 revival on the island of Lewis there were cottage meetings for teenagers where an eyewitness told me 'there was such power in the singing that people went out through the power of the Spirit'. Younger people do not appear to have been converted in the later Hebridean awakening of 1949–52, although Revd Norrie McIver recollects being aware of God as an eight year old on the Island of Lewis, and Duncan Campbell paid tribute to the public praying of sixteen-year-old Donald Macphail as a factor in

¹⁷ *Times of Blessing*, 18 April 1874; Sprange, *Children in Revival*, p. 2310.

¹⁸ *The Campaign Weekly*, 3 March 1900; Sprange, *Children in Revival*, p. 357.

the breakthrough in some of his meetings. The one exception to this was the Faith Mission's work in Sollas (North Uist) in 1958 where children were moved, and the conversion testimony of an eleven-year-old girl has been recorded.

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